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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development

Statement submitted by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The Right to Education: focus on the implementation of the World Summit for Social Development

Poverty is the most important moral question facing this age, according to the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the World Summit for Social Development (E/CN.5/1999/3). The assessment of the outcome of the Summit indicates the global extent and depth of poverty five years after the nations of the world discussed and formulated plans to eradicate poverty, create employment and promote social integration.

The School Sisters of Notre Dame, a non-governmental organization associated with the Economic and Social Council and the Department of Public Information of the United Nations, have been involved in education for over 150 years. We have maintained schools and informal educational programmes in 35 countries of our world. Therefore, the focus of this statement is on the human right to education, which is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We know that commitment 6 of the Copenhagen Summit calls for universal and equitable access to quality education, health care and nutrition. It calls for the eradication of illiteracy. The document states that these services are essential for human development and improvement in the quality of life. It is a widely accepted fact that societies benefit as a whole when education and health care are accessible to all. However, cost-effectiveness seems to continue to be the criterion for choosing the means for delivery of these services.

The State of the World's Children 1999, a publication of the United Nations Children's Fund, tells us that nearly a billion people, two thirds of them women, will enter the twenty-first century unable to read a book or sign their names -- much less operate a computer or understand a simple application form. Without an education, people cannot work productively, care for their health, sustain and protect themselves and their families or live culturally enriched lives. Illiteracy makes it difficult for them to interact in society in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance and gender equality among all peoples and groups. Within our society, the denial of education harms the cause of democracy and social development as well as international peace and security.

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In most of the world's religious traditions, each person reflects their God-given dignity and has basic rights and responsibilities that flow from our human nature and belong to us as humans regardless of any social or political structures. These rights begin with the right to life. They include those things that make life truly human, such as the rights to:

- Freedom of conscience; to raise a family;
- Life without discrimination;
- A share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family, including adequate food, clothing, housing, health care, education, employment and a safe environment.

These rights carry corresponding responsibilities — to one another, to our families, to our communities and to society at large — to respect the rights of others and to work for the common good.

At Copenhagen, we also committed ourselves to the universalization of basic education, early childhood education and various means of non-formal education. We promised to ensure that children, particularly girls, enjoy their rights to education, adequate nutrition and health care and, further, promised:

- Adolescents the right to complete schooling;
- To recognize and support the right of indigenous people to an education that is responsive to their needs, aspirations and cultures;
- To develop broad-based education programmes that promote human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development;
- To promote the values of tolerance, responsibility and respect for the diversity and rights of others and to provide training in peaceful conflict resolution.

Because the School Sisters of Notre Dame have effectively organized and provided teacher training in mountainous and rural areas of developing countries, I would like to encourage local and national governments and United Nations agencies such as UNICEF to initiate and maintain programmes for teacher preparation in the local rural communities, primarily for teachers at the primary level and in basic adult literacy programmes. We also recommend that partnerships be established in local areas among the village leaders, parents, religious groups, non-governmental organizations, and local governments to determine the needs for education, nutrition and health. This same group of partners can then determine ways to satisfy these needs and to determine ways to finance projects, which may mean dealing with government officials at regional or national levels. The more educational programmes that are available to the community the better able its members will be to set goals for themselves and find ways to meet their needs.

Our experience in developing countries points to corruption and civil unrest as the principal obstacles to quality education. In many areas, there is widespread corruption among the local school personnel, administrators and teachers, who confiscate funds and supplies for their own personal use. In many places, there is also abuse of pubescent girls by male teachers. It seems appropriate that national Governments provide mechanisms for the eradication of these abuses of power and authority within their school systems.

The second obstacle mentioned is armed conflicts and civil war. As previously stated, training in conflict resolution is necessary at all levels of education. Resources are needed to:

- Continue educational programmes in refugee camps;
- Set up treatment centres for long term illnesses and disabilities;
- Provide services in situations where normal living conditions have been suspended because of armed conflicts and natural disasters.

Our organization supports the recommendation presented in the above-mentioned report of the Secretary-General that increasing public expenditure on education, health and other social services can be accomplished by reducing low priority outlays such as military spending, as well as through mobilizing additional resources.

International debt is another dangerous obstacle to social services, including education, health and nutrition, forcing the world's most impoverished countries to use scarce resources to pay their debts rather than invest in the well-being of their people. We believe that, just as the debt burden is felt most severely by the poor, so too should debt cancellation benefit the poor. Debt cancellation should free resources for investment in human development and social services.

Our organization endorses the proposals addressed in *The State of the World's Children 1999*. To protect children's right to education, schools and education systems must be gender-sensitive and girl-friendly. Key measures that have proven to promote girls' schooling and that also enhance the quality of the school experience for all children, include:

- Offering a learning experience that is child centred;
- Schooling that is relevant and conducted in the local language;
- Recruiting and training teachers to be more sensitive to gender and to children's rights;
- Locating schools closer to children's homes; ensuring that schools are places of safety with a supply of safe water and latrines; and rooting out gender bias from textbooks and materials.

The School Sisters of Notre Dame will continue to struggle in solidarity with those who are poor for justice and the right to quality education. We committed ourselves in 1997 to continually explore and face the complexity of the economic, social, and political causes of poverty as we work towards the elimination of unjust structures within the global community. In each of the 35 countries where our members live and work, we will continue to exert our efforts to change the political will in order that social services are provided in an inclusive way, that all citizens enjoy the right to participate in decision-making and the right to call providers to account for the quality of service they use and for which they pay. We also expect the Commission for Social Development, the United Nations agencies and national Governments to continue the direction set in the Copenhagen Declaration, to include and to give consideration to the spiritual needs of individuals, families and communities along with materials needs. We encourage you to reverence and to respect the religious diversity that exists within communities. Allow your recognition of this diversity to be reflected in the decisions you make for the delivery of all social services, but especially for education.